



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Employment and Learning

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Digital Strategy for Northern Ireland:
Momentum Briefing

22 May 2013

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Robin Swann (Chairperson)
Mr Thomas Buchanan (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Sammy Douglas
Mr David Hilditch
Mr Chris Lyttle
Mr Fra McCann
Ms Bronwyn McGahan
Mr Pat Ramsey
Mr Alastair Ross

Witnesses:

Mr Justin Edwards	Momentum
Mr John Healy	Momentum
Dr Ian Graham	Momentum
Mr Rob McConnell	Momentum

The Chairperson: Gentlemen, you are very welcome to the Committee, and thanks for your time. I welcome Mr Rob McConnell, chairman of Momentum and director of SQS; Dr Ian Graham, CEO of Momentum; John Healy, head of technology for Citi; and Mr Justin Edwards, assistant CEO and director of Curriculum in Belfast Metropolitan College. In following on from the previous evidence session on how we tackle these problems, you will appreciate the value of your presentation and time. I assume that members have read your presentation, so if there is any additional information that you wish to provide now, it would be appreciated.

Mr Rob McConnell (Momentum): Thank you, Chair and members of the Committee, for having us here. We are a delegation from Momentum, which is the voice of the digital sector. As board members, we represent a number of companies, large and small. John Healy is from Citi, I am from the employer SQS and Justin Edwards is assistant chief executive at Belfast Metropolitan College. Together, we are a good representation of the education and industry sides. Ian will give a quick overview of who is in Momentum and what we do.

Dr Ian Graham (Momentum): Good morning, everyone. Momentum is the representative body of the digital industries in Northern Ireland. Its membership exceeds 350 businesses, which include large multinational corporations that have established centres, typically development centres, in Northern Ireland. They include SQS, Citi, Allstate — you may have heard that it announced 650 new jobs last week — and Liberty. By number, the largest section of our membership comprises businesses that are indigenous to the region, and they range from one-man sole trader operations to pretty substantial

companies of over 500 people, such as Singularity, which was recently acquired by Kofax. Singularity is a Derry-based organisation with a global footprint.

So Momentum is a broad church. The final section of our membership consists of key stakeholders, including academia, represented here by Belfast Metropolitan College. The key part of having the college as a member is that it links education directly to industry, so we can ensure that the college output meets the demands of the sector.

Mr McConnell: In light of the conversation that you have just had, the news is good. We are a sector that has significant economic potential. We currently employ 28,000 people and expect that we can move to around 50,000 people having high-value jobs in the economy within the next five years. We have to stress that, to be a front-runner as an industry, we need respective Departments, such as the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL), the education system and industry to work together in harmony. We see the target of 20,000 jobs in five years as ambitious but wholly achievable. As Ian said, recent announcements from the likes of Deloitte and Allstate support what we said in January.

In recognition of the opportunity, Momentum has taken it upon itself, as an industry representative body, to draft a manifesto, which I hope that you have all seen. We will make sure that it is distributed. It is a starting point for embarking on a process of developing an overarching strategic action plan for the Northern Ireland digital sector, in a similar vein to what we witnessed in the agrifood sector.

The manifesto focuses on the key challenges and constraints of our companies, large and small. They include challenges in skills, an area pertinent to the Committee, access to new markets and access to available funding. Skills are in the limelight, but this is not purely about the supply of skills; we also need to drive, and continue to drive, demand. We can do that by activating the same sort of momentum that we have currently on skills in the areas of markets and funding.

The sector in which we operate continues to grow rapidly, which makes it very difficult for everyone to keep up. Over the past 15 years, we have seen explosive growth and the evolution of software products and service companies. Ian mentioned Liberty, Allstate, Citi, the New York Stock Exchange and some home-grown organisations such as Quinity, ICS and Lagan Technologies, which is now KANA.

We are concerned that we risk not being able to take full advantage of the success unless we have identified the fundamental needs of the sector moving forward. We have to remember that this sector and the global landscape for these products and services are highly competitive. Competition comes from regions near and far, including the South, Scotland, China and India. When in India two weeks ago, I witnessed the explosive growth there. Those regions are competing for this business. That is why we, as an industry, need continued support from Departments such as DEL in developing the strategic action plan and road map that will drive the sector forward. I guess, for want of a better phrase, that we would like to be backing the right horses at this stage and taking a long, hard look at where we are now and where we will move forward to.

Momentum feels that it is ideally positioned to deliver on any strategic action plan, having already worked closely with Departments such as DEL and education bodies on highly significant initiatives: the hugely successful Bring IT On campaign; and the ICT private and public apprenticeship programme. We were in Derry last week promoting that programme to the companies in the north-west. There are also things like CoderDojo and the Software Testers Academy, which I was involved in from the very start. I was also a benefactor; hiring 20% of the first out-turn. We have the knowledge, relationships and experience to be the true voice of this sector and make a real difference to Northern Ireland plc.

The manifesto sets out some of our ideas in the areas of skills, markets and funding. Ultimately, we aim to host a digital summit on 25 September, which will bring all of the relevant stakeholders together to agree a way forward for Northern Ireland as a region. Our request of you is that you support the process that we have embarked on and, in particular, work with us to ensure that we develop and deliver a sustainable strategic action plan for the sector. That concludes my presentation. I am open to for any questions that you may have.

The Chairperson: Thanks, Rob. On your manifesto and action plan, have you had any support or seen any outcome from the Department's ICT action plan? Is it realistic, does it support what you are looking for and is it doing the right things?

Mr McConnell: Absolutely, it is doing the right things. Our motto is "Lots has been done, more to do". We are very pleased with the participation, from DEL in particular, in some of the initiatives that I mentioned, which are specific to the skill needs of the sector. Take software testing as an example: I work for an organisation that employs 22,000 people across the world — we have 230 in Ireland — and they are all software test professionals. We have a skills problem. We cannot get enough people with those skills. The Software Testers Academy addressed that head-on, and its third cohort is now bringing more people on. The message is that lots of very good things are being done. It is about what needs to be done moving forward and what else we need to do on both these very good initiatives, which are ongoing.

The Chairperson: You touched on the issue of the wrong skills. Are colleges and universities teaching the right skills for the industry?

Mr McConnell: Ask Justin for the answer to that. *[Laughter.]*

The Chairperson: I am not getting at you, Justin. My question relates to Allstate's announcement, in which it stated that up to half of the graduates being taken on were non-IT graduates because the pool was not here. That is a big risk for Allstate, but, if we had the right graduates from the right courses, surely we could attract more business.

Mr Justin Edwards (Momentum): You have to look at skills across the whole education sector and the skills that we provide. Being part of Momentum is a very useful link for the college in understanding how we adapt. In our curriculum strategy, we looked at six areas, one of which was digital creative cloud software. We introduced that in 2010 and, last year, the college had a 154% recruitment increase in software engineering courses. We can see the scale of growth coming from there. On the flip side of that, we are taking entries at the 16-to-19 age group. I previously mentioned to the Committee the question of whether young people get the right careers advice to feed them into opportunities in the ICT industry.

We also have to look at whether all of the qualifications are appropriate to the needs. There is a broad range, and, from talking to the industry, I know that the need is for software testing and software engineering. Yes, there is an element of hardware, and maybe we have too many qualifications in the space around IT users. It is not only about products, the operating system and the day-to-day work; we are crying out for software builders, and perhaps that was Allstate's point. The college is trying to adapt and move into that space. We also want to raise the expectations and demand that learners place on us. We connect the demand for skills with the supply. The college simply asks as a catalyst between the two.

Mr John Healy (Momentum): I will pick up on some of the points that Justin made. From an employer's perspective, we are seeing the universities and colleges changing their curriculum and course content. They are definitely engaging with us, as the employers of their output, on what should be taught to students. That is hugely beneficial to us as an economy. There is a need to aggregate demand from the employers, be they Allstate, Citi or Deloitte. The universities and colleges provide great partnership by taking people from non-IT disciplines and putting them through conversion courses, such as the hugely successful Software Testers Academy, now going into its third run. Another provision is the cloud computing academy that is about to start, and, in my particular sector, there was a very successful course that was specifically geared to the capital market. I emphasise Justin's point about the nature of the sector here. The digital economy here is very much about the provision of core IT skills — software engineering and software testing — and not the ICT-type skills being promoted through schools. We are working very hard to address that.

The Chairperson: Thanks, John. Are we doing enough scanning of what is coming in the future so that we are preparing people for the next generation, not just the current market?

Mr McConnell: That is a very good point. It is a core part of why we want to hold this summit. It is not just about looking at the here and now but at what the strategic direction needs to be for the region. The region is very much supported by foreign direct investors, large companies attracted by our talent pool and skills pool, and we have to ensure that they continue to invest. However, we must also support indigenous companies and fuel innovation and export-led growth. It is important that we use the summit to drive a strategy, and the initiatives for the future will fall out of that. Gartner, which is a world-leading global expert, is attending the conference to give us a global view. That is important because we, as a region, can then see how we fit into that. In the technology space, it talks about the nexus of forces, which is the advent of mega trends, such as cloud computing, social, big data and

mobile. When I talk to organisations and my customers in the investment banking space, the utility space and insurance, they are all looking at how they embrace those technologies. Those are drivers for the skills that we need to develop in our region. Broadly, those are the game-changing things that are starting to unfold in our space and are being adopted by global CIOs. That will take time to filter through. A lot of what we are already doing is trying to pre-empt what the skills needs will be.

Picking up on what John and Justin said, we need to think about the early years foundations and how we integrate the skills that we need into early education and Key Stages of testing, how we teach teachers, how we teach the kids, and how we augment what we are doing in the existing syllabus. We are involved heavily in CoderDojo, which is primarily a voluntary initiative from our sector that teaches kids on Saturday mornings. Instead of playing rugby, we are teaching them to code — I do not know whether that is a good thing or a bad thing. We have kids as young as six. It is about leveraging the fun aspect of our sector and creating games and those sorts of things. That initiative should be build on and brought in. We have started to open up discussions with the likes of the Department of Education (DE) and the head of curriculum and so on about how we might do that.

There needs to be a coming together of parties. Our organisation can be that gel between the sector, education and the relevant Departments.

The Chairperson: What is a global CIO?

Mr McConnell: Chief information officer. Those are typically the guys who hold the purse on investment decisions around information systems and business systems that support organisations.

Mr P Ramsey: You are most welcome here this morning. What you hope to do with the next 20,000 jobs is positive and challenging. We have an inquiry into careers guidance. Clearly, something has gone dramatically wrong in careers guidance, particularly in schools, over the years. There has not been consistency.

It is not just Allstate that is creating those opportunities. I recall that, at a conference that I was at, one of the speakers made it very clear that, for the next generation of young people, 50% of the jobs for young people have not even been created yet. We are going to be in the next stage of technology.

There is absolutely no difficulty from any member at the table about endorsing your manifesto. How do you get all the players on board? Some of the primary schools, in particular, that we have talked to during the inquiry said to us that the equipment that they are using is so out of date that it is unreal. They cannot be expected to bring children through with ICT skills to meet the digital economy targets. The challenge is to the colleges and universities as well. How many degree courses have been increased in the past two years for those specific subjects? I do not think that there have been that many. Where are the priorities to target where this should be happening? We have a lost generation of young people. The number of young people in particular is growing. A hell of a lot more young people are NEET than we are being told in the presentation. Where is the hope —

The Chairperson: Question, Pat.

Mr P Ramsey: — that we can give?

Allstate made it clear that it needs not just graduates. A variety of ICT skills will get people across the doorstep; they do not require a university degree. How do you encourage the next generation to go there?

Dr Graham: Over the past five years, we have been working closely with support from DEL on the Bring IT On campaign. E-skills UK was also part of that campaign. Over that period, we addressed 240 secondary schools across Northern Ireland. So, we are engaging with the young people and are getting them involved in exercises that demonstrate their capabilities. It is all about promoting and selling the opportunity. These things take time. Changing perceptions takes time. We come from a background where professions such as law and accountancy are the norm. We are changing, and, if our economy is going to prosper, we really have to embrace technology and get more young people engaged in technologies. Things like the Bring IT On programme are designed to create that situation.

We are also looking at how we can extend the Bring IT On messages to primary schools, because we recognise that the earlier you can capture the imagination of a young person the better. Our

experience of running CoderDojo with Belfast Met on a Saturday morning at the Titanic centre has been that the real interest comes from the seven- and eight-year-olds. We have a group of about 75 who come together.

The Dungannon campus of South West College is now running a CoderDojo, and North West Regional College is starting one up, so we are broadening this out across the Province. You are right to say that there is a lot of talent that is not being captured by the standard education system. We want to bring young people in, including those from disadvantaged communities. We are working with the Spectrum Centre on the Shankill Road to find out how we can engage with young disengaged people and get them involved. Rob used the phrase, "panning for gold". There is talent there, and if we can identify that, we can increase the pool of real skills that can make Northern Ireland successful well into the future.

Mr P Ramsey: There is a very realistic target of 20,000 jobs within the digital sector. What targets do the universities and colleges have to provide additional courses for that supply?

Mr Healy: The journey that Ian talked about there — over five years of trying to promote the sector, primarily with parents who are helping the kids to make these decisions — is starting to bear fruit. Certainly, the data that we as a sector are seeing from the universities is very promising in terms of the number of people who are applying for IT courses in the coming year. So, we are starting to see the fruit.

The problem with that is that it is going to take time for that to work through the system for us to consume it. It is also going to take a continued effort from our sector to keep the hopper full, keep the kids engaged and keep them applying for those courses and coming through. That is why we also need to keep an eye on the fast, conversion-type courses for people who may have had poor career advice or engaged in poor course selection and have found themselves with qualifications with which they cannot find a suitable graduate-type role. We are being very much supported by DEL in what we want to do as a sector, which is to reach into those pools of talent, recruit from them and help the people get into the areas where we know we can make jobs.

Mr McConnell: We also want to augment that with a longer-term career management approach, dovetailing into part-time degrees or further education courses. It is not just a case of picking these people up and letting them fly into industry, it is about supporting them and looking at programmes where we can pan for gold, take the nuggets through, accelerate their training, get them into jobs, get that on-the-job learning and hold their hand for a period of time. Effectively, we want to create the talent of tomorrow. That is what we need to be doing.

Mr Healy: There are a few things that will help us to be successful in that. First, we have come together as a sector, realised the potential and want to make a difference. The second factor is the fact that we are here today and that you, as a body, are so keen to engage with us and hear the story. As a place to do business, that is hugely powerful. The third dimension is the engagement with the universities and colleges, who hear what we are saying about what we think we can do and are responding accordingly.

With regard to kids who are coming out and who we are seeing at interview, I am in a very privileged position because I get to look into what is happening in our centres around the globe. The one thing I would say about the people who we have here compared to others is that they have a real culture of learning and education. That stands us in really good stead, and it makes it possible for us to delve into those other pools, recruit people and layer on top the skills that we need as employers. That, again, is something that will stand us, as a region, in very good stead.

Mr Edwards: One of the challenges you mentioned is adapting to the changing needs. Hopefully, by showing that the colleges are working directly with employers here today and by listening, we are trying to understand that change. You mentioned IT hardware. I think one of the challenges is with skilled educators. The computing industry moves at an incredibly rapid pace, and the challenge is making sure that the educators, who perhaps left industry or university a number of years ago, are up to speed with cloud computing, big data and mobile application development and making sure that efforts are made to reskill.

The college ran an event called STEM Matters. We brought 150 post-primary teachers and 54 employers onto our site and did a sort of speed dating around the table, where employers said, "These are the skills we are looking for; can you teach those skills?" It is just opening the shutters or the

curtains into understanding what the skills need is, so that the teachers can then start to address their skills or perhaps knowledge gaps and start to meet that need. I think we need to do more of that. I think we need to look at what we are doing in teacher education and teacher re-education so that we can keep pace with what the sector is doing.

Mr Douglas: Like Pat, I welcome you this morning. I think you asked for any suggestions of possible stakeholders. I was thinking of social economy projects. There is one in east Belfast, Avec Solutions, which has been going for 12 years. That is just a typical example of a lot of the work that is going on right across Northern Ireland. In your report, you stated that a lot has been done but there is more to do. I want to bring you back to the ICT apprenticeship programme, because it is something that we have been pushing for here in terms of what you said, Ian, about disadvantaged communities and NEETs. Will you give us a wee update on how that is going? Is there potential to expand that?

Mr McConnell: I will take that question initially. Obviously, we had a success with the 32 people in the Belfast cohort last year. We had the ceremony for their certification in January. They are on a two-year programme. We believe very strongly in the apprenticeships programme as a route, especially for school leavers, but also for people who find themselves in that unfortunate position, just through misfortune, of being unemployed from a job they did very well. That is why we went to Derry last week. We were hosted by Seagate, and we got a number of employers in the room, Allstate being one. We presented on the success of the programme, in partnership with your colleagues from DEL, such as Michael Gould. We were able to give first-hand experience from the likes of Kainos. Paul Hamill at Kainos took five people off the programme initially, and they are all working in the same way that I took people off the Software Test Academy and they are all working.

The proof of the pudding is in the eating. There is a common process, which is around the ability to test catchments in large groups and understand who has the aptitude, based on the profiles of the people within our sector and the ability to bring them through from the academic side to the job itself. We see that as something that has to continue, and even on a bigger scale. There is an argument for the build-and-they-will-come concept. I like to coin phrases, but rather than looking at which employer will take which people, create a group of people, and they will dissipate into the local economy. They may go overseas. That is not a bad thing, because we always have people returning.

We have to be thinking, "Let's take a punt". I think that punt would pay off. I do not think it is a huge risk. We still train plenty of hairdressers and construction workers. The fact that the demand is there means that we should really go a little bit further than taking 20 or 30 people. We heard from the skills directorate — Kevin and Colleen — in the north-west last week. The colleges there have something like 357 students. The question is: What do they do when they come out? I would like to see programmes for testing those people to try to identify those who we can back for our sector. I think there is an appetite within our industry to reach in to the education system. We have seen companies such as Asidua and others produce scholarships, put their money where their mouths are and say that they will take those guys and carry them through. I think that we could do that on a bigger scale if, as an industry body, we could get something moving. Yes, we should do more of it.

Mr Douglas: That is the sort of successful programme that we have been talking about. We have talked here about targeting those young people and on numerous occasions about apprenticeships. Please keep us up to date on that.

Mr McConnell: Yes.

Mr Lyttle: Thank you gentlemen. You have answered a lot of questions that I was going to ask. What does a young person in Northern Ireland at the moment need to do to avail themselves of those jobs in the coming years?

Mr McConnell: Ian, do you want to take that one?

Dr Graham: Yes, I can. We have a number of pathways into the sector. There are apprenticeship pathways, direct pathways and standard application. We need all of those pathways because no one way is going to meet the demand, so we need to expand the number of pathways. What we are trying to put together is a pathway description, so that young people can clearly understand the various options that they have, at whatever stage they are at, for getting into the sector. We have been working with e-skills UK to upgrade the Bring IT On website so that those are invisible and promoted. We are starting another advertising programme this year around the whole career progression.

Mr McConnell: It is definitely about awareness, not just for the kids themselves, but for the parents. We, obviously, had the dot-com bubble burst at the time, and there is a bit of a bad taste in the mouth of some parents. They are wondering which way to direct their child. So it is about educating the parents and also, as Ian said, providing easily accessible information, stuff that is easy to understand. I went to the Belfast Boys' Model School and talked to the head ICT teacher not that long ago. She said that the boys do not really know what is there for them or what their options are. What we must do collectively is make it very clear what their options might be and drive that out through technology. Ian mentioned the web, but there is no reason why we cannot produce the likes of mobile applications that these guys can download from an app store, and it will give them a very good guide to what the career paths are.

That is not just for the kids; it is for people who find themselves out of work and are looking to reskill, retrain or go down another route. John tells us all very good stories about talking to taxi drivers who regularly say, "Well, you know I —"

Mr Healy: I saw that on the way up here today. It was encouraging to visit the Belfast Met to look at some of the courses that are available there that will lead to jobs in our sector. One of the big successes of the Bring IT On campaign is promoting the sector as something that you might become interested in getting a job in. Once we work through all these pathways, in conjunction with e-skills UK, it will be even more accessible to the kids and careers teachers who are helping the kids make those decisions and, very importantly, the parents.

Mr Edwards: The IT sector is one of the few that offers the full spectrum of skills. You are talking about from level 2 to level 7, which is postgraduate level, and so they go from entry-level right the way through. On the entry-level side, colleges, in particular, are trying to attract young people and the NEETs that you have spoken about already today to an opportunity to build up from training, through apprenticeship, to higher-education apprenticeship in that pathway. So, starting on a national diploma or a Training for Success (TFS) pathway is that way in through to work.

Once on that ladder, the opportunities are limitless in the IT industry. Years ago, we talked about the boom in the construction industry, and a lot of people came into the FE sector particularly for vocational skills. This is the new opportunity. We are talking about IT plumbers. The big call is for level-3 and level-4 IT people to provide technical support, and software engineers, at levels 4, 5 and onwards. The courses are out there; they are in the colleges. We can go even further with the Bring IT On campaign and advertise to young people that these are the opportunities and this is how you get on the ladder.

Mr Lyttle: I proposed the inquiry into careers education. We still have a huge challenge to get information out to young people and, as you said, in particular, to parents. If you have not fed into that inquiry, it would be good to hear from you if possible.

Dr Graham: It is a very big advantage of our sector that a rich variety of careers is available. However, that variety means that it is often difficult to explain it fully to parents. Whereas, if you look at traditional professions such as accountancy, for example, there is one way; it is a simple description. We can offer a rich range, but that rich range requires a lot of description and a lot of information about the various options at various stages. That is a challenge we hope to address.

Ms McGahan: Thank you for your presentation. First, in an update from the Department, through the Graduating to Success and Access to Success programmes, there will be 500 additional undergraduate places created by 2015, bringing the total number of STEM places to 1,200. While that is to be welcomed, does it meet the need? Is there more that could be done?

Secondly, how successful has your engagement with schools been in getting them to add on A-level computing to the curriculum? Is there a potential shortage of teachers in that particular field at secondary-school level? I know that my daughter's school has added A-level agriculture to the curriculum, but they have to go next door to the FE college in Dungannon to do that.

Mr Healy: The additional STEM places are most welcome. They will not satisfy all the demand that we can see as employers, and that is why we are so keen on all of these additional routes, including ICT apprenticeships, which we think will be a rich seam, and through some of the part-time earn-and-learn programmes. There was a very big write-up of Kainos, which has started to employ people coming straight out of school. It is putting them through part-time courses where there are not any

caps at the university, and the universities are very keen for other employers to explore that with them as well. In addition to the new places, there is still a lot more that needs to be done.

As for ICT at schools and whether schools are equipped for computer science, I, as an employer, am very negative about ICT. I think that it gives kids totally the wrong idea as to what the sector is about and does not truly prepare them. We know that we have a long way to go to help the schools actually teach computer science, because it is different from ICT. In certain conversations that we would have as an employers' body, we would say that we are very willing to help schools develop and to help teachers develop into being able to deliver the course content from a computer science perspective, but we appreciate that there is quite a gap there.

Mr Edwards: Of the two A-levels in software engineering and ICT, my understanding is that only 11 post-primary schools offer the software engineering, because its delivery is more challenging to the skills of the staff. That comes back to my point; I think we have to look at updating staff skills. There are ICT tutors, but the market has moved on so much. We need to work with those ICT tutors and educators and with industry. Through Momentum, we have been doing a lot of work where industry partners have been coming in on a voluntary basis to work alongside our lecturers to make sure they have absolutely the latest skills. The Colleges into Industry initiative, which the Department led on, puts our lecturers back out into industry on placements so they get the private sector experience and bring that back. Perhaps there will be an opportunity to look at schemes such as that on a much broader scale, with universities and schools joining up teachers of ICT across the board.

Mr Healy: We find that our employees who engage in those back-into-school type of initiatives benefit hugely from it by way of their own personal development, and they also value the opportunity to give something back. There is definitely a resource there that could be used.

Mr Edwards: You mentioned the entitlement funding and using colleges to deliver into the 14-19 environment in the post-primary sector. Of course, the entitlement funding is there for a further two years, but if that funding stopped, the opportunity for colleges doing software engineering to link back with schools would be at risk. That is because the schools purchase it from the colleges where it is a quality offer.

Mr Buchanan: You talked about the potential for 50,000 jobs in the next five years. That is quite a challenge, given the situation we find ourselves in. Are there enough places in the universities and colleges to meet the demand of the young people who need to be trained and for the reskilling of others in order to drive this forward and meet the targets and the need?

Mr McConnell: We are saying no, we do not think that there is that capacity. That is why it needs to be augmented with other initiatives such as some of the initiatives that we talked about, including apprenticeships, shared-skills programmes and those types of things. We believe that there could be as many as 1,000 open positions in our sector, and that is scary. John has over 100 open positions, and you will have heard the recent announcements about Kainos. We know that there are not enough graduates coming out, so I guess that we are looking to gain the industry's acceptance of opening the door a bit wider. We do not want them to lower the bar, because we want to continue to push people to that level and quality of academia. Other entry routes into our sector maybe did not exist in the past, because we were quite rigid about what we would accept, but that was when there were lots of graduates. Today, there are not enough graduates; that is a simple fact. Hopefully, that answers your question.

Mr Buchanan: Yes.

Mr F McCann: I will try to be brief. Sometimes I get quite depressed in this Committee listening to the presentations of people who say that they provide this and that. It is quite refreshing to have people talking about outcomes, jobs and prospects for the future.

One of the issues that this scrutiny Committee has dealt with is Steps to Success and how it impacts on jobs for the future. Does the Department ever sit down with people like you and ask you how you draft a scheme like that, which allows people to come through? I represent West Belfast, where there are serious difficulties in educational attainment at secondary school level. Are you ever asked to come in?

Mr McConnell: Absolutely. The Department is open. I hope that the message that we are leaving with you is that the Department is highly collaborative with our sector. We are certainly not coming here with a big stick and saying that it is not. In things like the Software Test Academy and the Cloud Computing Academy and other assured skills programmes, the Department is very collaborative in testing our norm groups, trying to get the right people in through the interview process and creating the right syllabus, including what is taught and how it is taught. It is very collaborative in what needs to be done. That is the key to success.

We know what the jobs are in our sector and what skills we need. Therefore, as an industry body, we need to interface on behalf of our sector with the various Departments such as DEL and DE to try to solve this quandary.

As I said before, we all have big concerns about our market; there are only small windows of opportunity, and a lot of the companies that are at the table can put the work elsewhere, in other parts of the world. We have to be very reactive and quick to take it. We also have to think about how we continue to drive the demands for skills and not become complacent and say, "Well, we have a skills shortage." We have got to think about the mentoring of companies, supporting companies with funding, looking at opening new markets, showcasing local technologies and even what we produce. We cannot fail to do that in our sector. We need to promote it locally as well as overseas and support the companies in more ways than just providing people.

Mr F McCann: We held a meeting last week in West Belfast and, for a first meeting there, it was not bad. I think that it was the first time that most of the people in the room had spoken to each other, and it surprised me how many providers there were in the lower part of West Belfast.

You spoke about a 150% increase in the people. What is the retention level? How many people are you talking about?

Mr Edwards: I spoke, in West Belfast, about a pilot programme in which we were looking at people with no qualifications progressing to level-3 ICT. A total of 16 students started that initial pilot and all 16 have remained until the end.

From talking to community providers in west and east Belfast, I know that there is a perception that ICT requires a level of attainment or skills to start on that ladder. I think that there is an aspiration issue in the 16-plus market, whereby they believe that they must go back to other trade areas such as motor vehicles, etc. However, once you bring young people in — even if they have no qualifications — spend some time mentoring them through the kinds of programmes that we do like Threshold, introduce them to computing and gain their confidence, they can jump well ahead. We have also seen that to be the case in the public-private partnership apprenticeship scheme — young people from mixed backgrounds coming in on a completely different career pathway and going into employers, such as Seagate last week, who say that these people are very committed, dedicated and highly productive. In fact, in some regards, they are challenging people who have come in with BSc degrees in their aspiration to make employment progress in the industry. So, again, the TFS work with community providers, through the likes of Threshold, and encouraging and inspiring people through to ICT, creates another pathway. Rob described it as panning for gold, and that is really panning for gold into this marketplace.

Mr McConnell: There is also the loyalty aspect. Typically, people who come through that route would be more loyal. In a time when skills are an issue, you do not want to lose people. So, there is an upshot; their motivation and loyalty has a benefit for employers.

The Chairperson: Gentlemen, in the absence of any other questions, I thank you very much for your time.

Mr McConnell: Thank you for your time.

The Chairperson: You have a call out for stakeholders for 25 September. If you want to, please consider the Committee as one of those stakeholders. I do not think that any members would object to that. Thank you very much for your time.